

TITLE PAGE

Men's Personal, Dyadic, and Family Well-Being Across the Family Life Cycle

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ABSTRACT

Men's Personal, Dyadic, and Family Well-Being Across the Family Life Cycle

Over the last decade, there has been a proliferation of theoretical, empirical, and practice work which uses the family life cycle concept. However, the attention to the experience of men in families has been minimal and no study has examined the relationship between the family life cycle and men's contentment, marital satisfaction, and sense of family cohesion. The current study investigated whether there were differences across the family life cycle for men in these three domains of family life and whether these aspects of well-being varied in a fashion parallel to the U-shaped pattern commonly identified in the family theory and research literature.

A cross-sectional design was used. Survey information for 1863 members of the Virginia National Guard was used to classify married men according to their stage in the family life cycle. The six family stages were (1) the young couples without children stage ($n=276$), (2) the families with preschoolers stage ($n=456$), (3) the families with school age children stage ($n=446$), (4) the families with adolescents in the home stage ($n=436$), (5) the launching families stage ($n=170$) and (6) the empty nest families stage ($n=79$). Single and previously divorced men, females, and men whose families did not meet operational definitions of one of the six family life cycle stages were excluded from the sample. Contentment was measured by the by the Generalized Contentment Scale (Hudson, 1982). Marital satisfaction was measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, et al., 1986), and family cohesion was measured by the Cohesion subscale of the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale III Instrument (Olson, Portner & Lavee, 1985).

The overall findings suggest that the family life cycle concept may be less useful than previously assumed. The results of the data did reveal some support for the U-shaped pattern across the family life cycle. However, this pattern was identified in only two of the dependent variables, contentment and marital satisfaction. There was less support for the other basic assumptions of the family life cycle. In the current study, a pattern of stage differences was not found for any of the three measures. The explanatory power of the family life cycle was minimal and not superior to simpler stratification schemes. No stage was associated with special vulnerability for the married men, and most notably, for all three measures, the four childrearing stages (Stage 2, Stage 3, Stage 4, and Stage 5) were found to be equivalent.

The current findings may reflect methodological differences from previous family life cycle research or the influence of gender and position on the family life effect. In either case, these results suggest that family researchers, practitioners, and theorists use caution in the use of the family life cycle concept as a marker of men's views of contentment, marital satisfaction, or family cohesion. Services to men and families may need to be more homogeneous rather than stage specific and consequently, tailored to common childrearing concerns instead of to developmental challenges presumably distinctive to each of the four childrearing stages.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH PRESENTATION

Men's Personal Dyadic, and Family Well-Being Across the Family Life Cycle Statement of the Research Problem

Despite a paucity of empirical social work research on men as husbands and fathers, family practitioners and theorists have shown enthusiastic support for the family life cycle concept. The interventions of many social workers are guided by notions of change over the family life cycle with minimum regard to possible gender and position related differences. Moreover, there is conflicting empirical support for the nature and even existence of these changes. Thus, the use of the family life cycle in both practice and policy does not yet have clear scientific support. This project is an attempt to help clarify the empirical foundations of the family life cycle concept as it is related to the well-being of married men.

Research Background and Hypotheses

The primary hypothesis derived from the theoretical and research literature suggests that the shape of the relationship between the stages of the family life cycle and virtually all phenomenon studied to date -- marital satisfaction, life satisfaction, equity in marital roles, parental satisfaction, mental disorder, and health -- is a curvilinear one. Family phenomenon tend to be related to the family life cycle in a U-shaped manner. The pre- and post-child rearing stages are associated with highs and the middle child-rearing stages with lows in measures of quality of family life.

Questions about the claim of a relationship between the family life cycle and aspects of well-being have been reported in the literature. The proposition that the family life cycle influences family life at all has been challenged. Other researchers have found only a minimal effect. Additionally, there has not always been agreement about the idea that the family life cycle is related to family behavior in a curvilinear U-shaped manner. Four other points of view about the shape of the relationship have been expressed: deterioration, L-shaped curve, peaks and valleys, and continual increase.

Failure to obtain consistent confirmation of the curvilinear hypothesis may have two-related sources. First, theoretically, the family systems perspective holds that change in the family reverberates throughout the family but no empirical attention has been given to the simultaneous examination of all three domains: the individual domain, the dyadic domain, and the whole family domain. Second, previous efforts have been limited methodologically because of small voluntary homogeneous samples, nonvalidated instruments without "clinical cutting points," and lack of control for possible intervening variables. The present study attempts to make theoretical and methodological improvements on previous research efforts. It examines the curvilinear hypothesis and other family life cycle assumptions with consideration for all three domains of family life.

Methodology

The study involved an additional analysis of state-wide survey data originally collected by the Virginia National Guard Research and Service Project. The Member Survey Questionnaire included a section measuring Guard members' views of their personal happiness, their marriage, and their family life. The individual domain was assessed by Hudson's Generalized Contentment Scale (GCS). The dyadic domain was assessed by the Kansas Marital

Satisfaction Scale (KMSS). The whole family domain was assessed by the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (FACES III). This measurement package avoids methodological limitations of previous studies. For example, the instruments are multi-item indices with established reliability and validity as well as clinical cutting points.

Data for the present study was collected between November 1988 and January 1989 in group administrations of the questionnaire. From the entire sample ($N=6,244$), a subsample of men married once was selected. This subsample of 1863 Guard members allowed for controlled cross-sectional comparisons of all three domains across six stages of the family life cycle: (1) newlyweds without children, (2) families with preschool children, (3) families with school age children, (4) families with adolescent children, (5) those in the "launching stage," and (6) "empty nest families."

The study's large sample size permitted sufficient n 's in each stage for analysis without collapsing any of the stages. The size also allowed for the multivariate control of variables thought to contaminate the family life cycle effect such as age, number of children in the family, and wife's employment status. The large sample in the present study is characterized by variation regarding such demographic characteristics as race, religion, and economic status. Finally, the respondents for the sample were not voluntarily self-selected. Thus, the sample is more representative of different families than previous samples. If there is a U-shaped relationship between the family life cycle and three family domains, then the theoretical and empirical refinements evidenced in this study should demonstrate such a relationship. In analyzing the data, a variety of hypotheses regarding the "goodness of fit" between the propositions inherent in the family life cycle approach and the findings of the current study were tested.

Results

Findings regarding six key family life cycle tenets are reported. 1) The results of the current data analyses did reveal some support for the expected curvilinear U-shaped pattern across the family life cycle. As indicated in Table 1, however, this pattern was identified in only two of the dependent variables: contentment and marital satisfaction (inverted for these variables because higher scores on the GCS and KMSS equal less positive well-being). As expected for a U-shaped curve men in stage 1 are slightly more content than men in the next family stage. Men also report dramatically higher contentment at the empty nest stage, stage 6, than at any other stage. Also as predicted by the curvilinear hypothesis, men report comparatively high marital satisfaction at the young couple without children stage and at the empty nest stage as childrearing responsibilities end. In contrast, the childrearing stages are

Table 1

Analysis of Variance: Comparison of Men's Mean Scores on Three Well-Being Measures
Across the Six Stages of the Family Life Cycle

	<u>Stage 1</u> Mean	<u>Stage 2</u> Mean	<u>Stage 3</u> Mean	<u>Stage 4</u> Mean	<u>Stage 5</u> Mean	<u>Stage 6</u> Mean	F Val.
GCS (N=1739)	25.8 (N=256)	27.9 (N=426)	26.7 (N=414)	26.4 (N=407)	24.8 (N=162)	20.2 (N=74)	3.67*
KMSS (n=1689)	4.3 (n=249)	4.8 (n=407)	5.0 (n=404)	4.8 (N=398)	4.7 (n=158)	3.7 (n=73)	4.94**
COH. (n=1712)	36.9 (n=246)	37.1 (n=414)	37.1 (n=411)	36.6 (n=406)	36.9 (n=162)	38.8 (n=73)	1.15

*P < .01, **P < .001

Interpretation of Measures:

For GCS, 0 is highest contentment and 100 is lowest contentment; for KMSS, 3 is very satisfied and 15 is very dissatisfied; for COH treated as a linear measure, 10 is lowest family cohesion and 50 is highest family cohesion.

Multiple Comparisons Tests (Duncan):

For GCS, Stage 6 differs from stage 1, stage 2, stage 3, stage 4

For Kansas, Stage 1 differs from stage 3; Stage 6 differs from stage 2, stage 3, stage 4 associated with lower marital satisfaction. The relationship between the family life cycle and family cohesion was not best depicted by a U-shaped curve but seems better represented by a flat line. 2). A basic premise of the family life cycle approach is the distinctiveness of each stage of the family life cycle. As indicated in Table 1, the evidence supports a picture of minimal stage by stage differences in the three family system domains and the family life cycle stages seem more similar than distinctive. The ONEWAY (analysis of variance) procedure with post hoc comparisons revealed fewer statistically significant differences for contentment and marital satisfaction between stages than expected. Moreover, most of these differences involve comparisons with the empty nest stage. There were no statistically significant differences in mean cohesion scores across the family life cycle. 3). Family scholars also frequently assume that family developmental events have a significant impact on individuals and thus, the family life cycle stage concept has special explanatory power as an independent variable. In the current study, the family life cycle's explanatory power was minimal. 4). The utility of the family life cycle as contrasted to less complicated methods for predicting temporal changes in well-being measures was also examined. The results replicated those of critics of the family life cycle concept who were unable to demonstrate the superiority of the family life cycle to simpler stratification schemes -- age cohort, marriage cohort, or family size -- in its explanatory power. 5). Family theorists, researchers and practitioners have claimed that certain family stages are characterized by special difficulty for family members. The use of "clinical cutting points" has

allowed for some insight into this issue and the findings do not suggest that certain stages even the assumed difficult "family with adolescent" and the "empty nest" stages are associated with more vulnerability for married men than others. 6). Many family life cycle theorists have presumed the central importance of the oldest or pathfinder child. Based on the "pathfinder" tenet of the family life cycle approach, it would be expected that men report different levels of contentment, marital satisfaction, and family cohesion following the birth of the first child and differences in levels of discomfort among all the childbearing stages. The data suggests that the presence or absence of children more simply explained statistical differences in the three well-being measures than maturation of children across the family life cycle. In sum, a review of findings testing the assumptions inherent in much family life cycle work provides only limited support for the family life cycle concept and suggests that for men, the family life cycle concept may have less merit than previously assumed by family practitioners and many family researchers.

The limited support for the family life cycle propositions in the current data may be attributable to a number of factors. Alternative explanations related to sample characteristics, methodological problems with previous studies, and changing conditions for married American men should be considered. Limitations of the current study including the use of a cross-sectional design, the restriction to intact heterosexual families, the exclusion of women's and children's views, and focus only on within-the-family domains may also have contributed to the meager support for the life cycle tenets.

Utility for Social Work Practice

This type of study has provided a "snapshot" of married men's perspective on the family at six different stages. Several implications of the study are offered. For one, these findings underscore the need to intensify family research efforts in the profession in order to answer research ambiguities apparent in the literature so interventions can be based on empirical research. Additionally, the current study adds a caution to those using the small body of knowledge guiding current service to men and their families. While there is some confirmation of the U-shaped notion, it seems that many of the corollary assumptions about the nature of the family life cycle may have been prematurely accepted. Moreover, the findings suggest that the theoretical explanations for the curve may be wrong. The mere appearance and departure of children may be responsible for the commonly observed U-shaped curve that is usually attributed to the family life cycle effect.

The importance of considering the stage of the family life cycle in research studies, program development, service delivery, or theory building has not been demonstrated. Family problems might better be viewed as similar for men and families across the childrearing period and consequently, service to these men and their families may need to be more homogeneous and generic focusing on common childrearing themes rather than on stage-specific whole family and individual member needs and tasks.

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